

Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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Editorial

The Newsletter in 1996

I looked over the 1996 issues including the current one to see if the last 6 numbers of this year have anything special about them. I am afraid barring a very few articles, the quality has not been very exciting. But it is cheering to find a few new names among the contributors. We must spread the net wider. As a result of a note in the Indian Express about the existence of our Newsletter, over a hundred replies came in; so there is scope for professional marketing. I am surprised that a scientific journal like *Resonance* published by the Indian Institute of Science has 8,000 subscribers. We have around 1000. Shall we console ourselves by the thought that the trend is satisfactory? Very glad to find that Lt Gen Baljit Singh has reverted to the Newsletter after a long absence. I am also counting on the other Lt Gen BC Nanda, to write regularly about his sightings in Coorg.

Whom shall we name as the Birdwatcher of the year? A difficult decision. Let us try this exercise at the end of 1997.

Wish you all good eyesight and good hearing in 1997, and the opportunity to enjoy the sight and song of our birds.

Mayura, Vol.11, 1994 — Published 1.11.1996

The Birdwatchers Society of Andhra Pradesh, publishes Mayura bi-annually, and the 69 pages issue under review contains several interesting articles. With the encouragement of Aasheesh Pittie and his colleagues, the bird group in Hyderabad has produced a Checklist of the Birds of Andhra Pradesh, but what is commendable is that it is constantly being updated. The first list was published in 1989, and this included 495 species. Now the list has gone up to 513.

Apart from checklists what makes Mayura a worthwhile publication is that the articles make very enjoyable reading. The entrance fee of Rs 10/- and the annual membership of Rs 35/- is an amount which subscribers will not regret paying.

There is an increasing number of local newsletters being published today. Will someone volunteer to send a report on these once or twice a year?

Where have the Sparrows gone

There have been several reports recently about the disappearance of sparrows from Bangalore. S. Subramanya says that the new streamlined buildings of cement have very few niches where sparrows can build their nests. The old architecture had plenty of nooks and crannies where the birds could place their nesting material. Will readers please report about the status of these birds from their own areas. Sparrows have the habit of roosting in selected bushes, and I remember a place in Rajmahal Vilas Extension where the

vigorous twittering of sparrows before they went to bed lasted for almost half an hour before and after sunset. This was in 1974, and I will survey the area again to see if any of this species still survives.

Incidentally larks too seem to be suddenly declining in number. See the note from the Guardian Weekly, reproduced in this issue.

Migration of Ospreys

Birds during migration use up the fat they have accumulated for the intended journey. How long can they fly without stopping for a rest and a feed on the way? Birds of

prey usually fly over mountain ridges making use of the updrafts of air which nature provides them. The osprey, being a fish eating bird would be expected to fly along the coast. Apparently it also flies over land. How much fat has it to accumulate to complete "a fasting journey of 3780 Km". Read about this interesting investigation in the Journal of Raptor Research June 1995. I will be glad to send a xerox copy to anyone seeking enlightenment and talking about fat in birds, I recall a remark by Salim Ali while we were watching a pair of buzzards in Bombay in December. You see how thin they are, he said. They have used up all their reserves on the way to their wintering grounds.



We went for a short trip to Vazhachal-Sholayar reserve forest from December 24 to 28 1995 to see the flora and fauna of that region. The camp was organised by Warblers & Waders (Group of Birdwatchers and Nature Lovers), Thiruvananthapuram. This was our first camp at Vazhachal, Athirapilli, Peringalkuthu and Sholayar region.

Vazhachal reserve forest is situated in Thrissur District of Kerala. The main habitats consist of evergreen forest & moist deciduous forest. Degraded secondary forest is absent at least in the tourist zone and much of this section surrounding the river is a mosaic of semi evergreen and moist deciduous woodland. The combination of different habitat is responsible for the diversity of birdlife at Vazhachal and Sholayar.

Significant observations are :

- 1 Oriental darter *Anhinga rufa*
A single bird was observed at the Sholayar reservoir.
- 2 Little green heron *Butorides striatus*
One individual found sitting near Sholayar lake under the shade of vegetation.
- 3 River tern *Sterna aurantia*
A single bird was patrolling gracefully over the water (Sholayar). Before sunset 6 more birds appeared over the lake and made loud and harsh kiya-kiya calls.
- 4 Rufous bellied eagle *Hieraaetus kienerii*
Most abundant raptor of the Sholayar region. A pair was seen soaring very low on December 26 over the reservoir. Three birds were seen again on December 27 in a valley near Sholayar power station.
- 5 Greyheaded fish eagle *Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus*
A solitary bird was regularly observed near Vazhachal 'Irumbupalam' (Iron bridge). In the evening the bird was seen on a medium sized tree near the river, preening itself.
- 6 Black eagle *Ictinaetus malayensis*
A black eagle was seen flying over the dense Sholayar reserve forest. It was sighted in the Vazhachal forest area also.
- 7 Greateared nightjar *Eurostopodus macrotis*
Heard at Vazhachal.

Birds of Vazhachal-Sholayar

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- 8 Blackcapped kingfisher *Halcyon pileata*
This rare kingfisher was regularly observed at Vazhachal and Sholayar.
- 9 Blue bearded bee-eater *Nyctornis athertoni*
A single bird was sighted at Vazhachal.
- 10 Broadbilled roller or Dollarbird *Eurystomus orientalis*
One bird was recorded at Sholayar reserve forest.
- 11 Great Indian pied hornbill *Buceros bicornis*
Only one bird was sighted at Vazhachal. A loud call was heard at Sholayar.
- 12 Speckled piculet *Picumnus innominatus*
Returning through Peringalkuthu, a pair of speckled piculets was observed feeding with mixed parties of grey tits, orange minivets and fairy bluebirds.
- 13 Dusky crag martin *Hirundo concolor*
Commonly seen at Sholayar
14. Whitebellied or Southern tree pie *Dendrocitta leucogastra*
Perhaps one of the most abundant species in the Vazhachal, Athirapilli and Peringalkuthu, observed regularly at Sholayar.
- 15 Black bulbul *Hypsipetes leucocephalus*
6-7 birds were observed regularly near Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) quarters, Sholayar, but not found at Vazhachal.
- 16 Grey tit *Parus major*
Common at Vazhachal, Athirapilli and Peringalkuthu. Surprisingly only one bird seen at Sholayar and it was on December 26, 1995.
- 17 Travancore scimitar babbler *Pomatorhinus horsfieldii*
Mostly heard. Two birds were recorded near a stream (Kannamukzhithodu) in Athirapilli. Another three were observed in an evergreen patch at Peringalkuthu. Two more were found in the evergreen patch on December 25, at Sholayar.
- 18 Verditer flycatcher *Eumyias thalassina*
Common at Athirapilli and Peringalkuthu. One bird was recorded at Sholayar reserve forest on December 27, 1995.
- 19 Ashy wren warbler *Prinia socialis*
Mostly observed in the degraded forest area and grass patches at Athirapilli and Vazhachal.

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| <p>20 Blyth's reed warbler <i>Acrocephalus dumetorum</i>
This migrant was quite common at Vazhachal and Sholayar.</p> <p>21 Booted warbler <i>Hippolais caligata</i>
A single bird was recorded at Athirapilli on December 25, 1995.</p> <p>22 Large billed leaf warbler <i>Phylloscopus magnirostris</i>
Quite common at Vazhachal, Athirapilli, Peringalkuthu and Sholayar.</p> <p>23 Thickbilled warbler <i>Acrocephalus aedon</i>
One bird was regularly observed from the verandah of the Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) quarters.</p> <p>24 Blue chat <i>Luscinia brunnea</i>
One male was observed at Sholayar on December 27, 1995.</p> <p>25 Eurasian blackbird <i>Turdus merula</i>
In the evergreen forest and teak plantations at Sholayar.</p> <p>26 Black-capped SSP <i>Turdus simillimus</i>
Fairly common at Sholayar.</p> <p>27 Large pied wagtail <i>Motacilla maderaspatensis</i>
A single bird on the Sholayar reservoir December 26 and 27.</p> <p>28 Nilgiri flowerpecker <i>Dicaeum concolor</i>
Common at Vazhachal Sholayar. Two nests were found in Sholayar (one near power house and the other near Sholayar dam) on Ficus trees (<i>Ficus asperima</i>).</p> <p>29 Small sunbird <i>Nectarinia minima</i>
Perhaps one of the most abundant species in the Vazhachal, Peringalkuthu and Athirapilli. But common also in Sholayar area. A nest was also found at Sholayar.</p> <p>30 White eye <i>Zosterops palpebrosa</i>
Six or seven birds were observed regularly near Keraia State Electricity Board (KSEB) office, Sholayar. Not recorded at Vazhachal.</p> | <p>31 Common rosefinch <i>Carpodacus erythrinus</i>
A group observed near Sholayar reservoir.</p> <p>32 Emerald dove <i>Chalcophaps indica</i>
Observed groups of two or three at Peringalkuthu, Vazhachal and Sholayar. Commonly seen on forest path.</p> <p>33 Red spurfowl <i>Gallus spadicea</i>
A single bird was seen on December 26, 1995 near Vazhachal Iron bridge.</p> <p>34 Grey jungle fowl <i>Gallus sonneratii</i>
It was heard calling throughout the day at Vazhachal and Sholayar. Large flocks were observed regularly at Vazhachal-Peringalkuthu road. One male observed preening.</p> <p>35 Brown hawk-owl <i>Ninox scutulata</i>
Quite common at Sholayar. At night four birds were regularly observed from the verandah of the Kerala State Electricity Board quarters.</p> |
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In all one hundred and twenty species of birds were recorded during the present survey. The note only refers to those which were of special interest to us.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Sri S Ravindran, Charpa Forest Range Officer for sharing his knowledge about the wildlife of the Vazhachal and Sholayar region. I am also thankful to members of the Warblers and Waders for their support and encouragement. I am also grateful to Sri N Radhakrishnan Nair and Sri Balakrishnan, KSEB Sholayar for being of such help in so many ways during our survey work in Sholayar region.



Introduction

While carrying out a reconnaissance survey of the Lesser Florican (*Syphiotides indica*) in Sardarpur (Madhya Pradesh) area. I had the opportunity to interview Dr Salim Ali on 13 August 1982 at the local guest house. At the time of the interview he was over 86 years but had an admirably sharp memory. The interview ended rather abruptly because of the sudden appearance of some visitors from the Forest Department.

Q. HSAY :

Sir, it has been repeatedly asked how you started bird watching but kindly tell me at what stage you thought you would take ornithology as a profession and a mission of your life.

SA :

Well, I did not really begin with the thought of making ornithology my profession because I was in business, in the mining business in Burma with my brother. During the first

Transcript of an Interview with Salim Ali

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world war 1914-18, we were doing quite well and I never thought that I would have to take ornithology as a profession because for one thing I was not qualified enough to take it up, and my only interest was a very amateurish one. But I was very deeply interested in birds and that is why I took this opportunity in Burma where the mining was all in thick forest and in forested country. That part of Burma where I was, i.e. Temasery, was particularly good for birds.

Those forests were situated in a place from which transport was most difficult because there were no roads and no paths and any other facility of that sort.

Q. HSAY :

Elephants were not employed?

SA :

Yes, elephants were used, but they were used for dragging the timber, to collect at a depot where they sawed it. It was mostly sawed by hand in the beginning. Then we had a small oil engine and a mill. But the great trouble was the moving of the stuff because you have miles and miles of

roads to build which we were not in a position to do because we were not a big company. And then we had one forest which was close to the sea, a place called Henzer Basin. It is a wonderful harbour but not properly developed and therefore the ships could not come close. We tried to transport the cut timbers and sleepers to the ship by using bamboo rafts but it took so much time and so much demurrage was incurred that we finally gave it up. After that I thought it might be a good thing to go back home and see what can be done. So we came back to Bombay and I was searching very hard for a job in the natural history line because from the beginning I was keen on this. I had no degree. I had just left college from the intermediate class and I wanted to take up Zoology as one of the subjects of the BA. At that time there was no B.Sc, it was BA hons. with Zoology. Because I went to Burma I could not complete it, but now I wanted to complete it. The Director of the Biology Department of my college — St. Xavier's College, said "you are so keen about birds, you will never be able to make any progress unless you have a scientific Zoological background". He asked me to go to the college and sit with the Honors class and get myself properly trained. So that was a good opportunity and I did that for one year. I did not sit for any proper examination because I was not thinking of a degree but just for knowledge. I did not think that a degree was so important. This is the advice I am giving to every young man that knowing that degrees do not mean very much, you must get a degree somehow. Because when you are out to get a job no one bothers to look at any other qualifications except what degree you have. And most mediocre people who have got degrees try to get jobs and the people who have done really good work, for instance Hussain ! (He meant Mr SA Hussain, a longtime ornithologist with BNHS and is currently with University of Malaysia?). If he goes outside for a job he would very doubtfully get one. Of course now with his all experience and his working with the Bombay Natural History Society he is greatly qualified. But otherwise when he came to us we just took him on trust hoping that he would do good and because we were not very concerned about degrees. And so it has turned out now that he is a first class scientist.

The curator of BNHS, at that time was Mr Prater. He was a very good friend of mine from earlier on, from before I went to Burma. We had been doing a lot of birding together, and as a matter of fact he did not have a degree either, and we did our Zoology together at St. Xavier's College. Both of us, because we were keen ourselves we really managed to absorb far more than any student who does it for a degree. In the beginning when we knew each other Prater was a very subordinate type of worker in the Society and the curator was a man called Kinear who later on became the Director of the Zoology Department and subsequently the Chief Director of the British Museum.

When Kinear went back to Britain after the war and took up as curator in the British Museum of Natural History, then Prater got a chance to act as curator of the Society. We were working very closely together and were very keen on birds and we used to go out and collect birds from around Bombay and other places. The present Prince of Wales Museum was a military hospital during the war and all the wounded soldiers from Mesopotamia and so on used to come to Bombay.

Q. HSAY :

The same building now is the Museum of Bombay ?

SA :

Yes, the same building. When the war was over and the hospital closed, the building was made into a museum with a natural history section. For the natural history section we wanted to have the latest methods of exhibition. The then management committee of the Society consisted of some very far sighted men, mostly English men. They said that to put up a museum like this we want a trained curator and we cannot get one. So they sent Prater for training to England and America where he learnt all the modern techniques (of those days) came back and put up this museum with the help of his assistant curator, a man called Charles Mcaan who was a very good botanist and a very special student of Father Blatter. These two people, I think were really the best set of the people that the Society had. The Society owes a great deal for its popularity and for its publicity to them. Then the Society represented to the Government of Bombay that we have got this wonderful museum but unless we had a Guide Lecturer who would explain to the visitors all about the animals that were displayed, the museum would do no educative work. So they pestered the Government of Bombay and finally they made them agree to appoint a Guide Lecturer in natural history and applications were called for. There were many graduates and post graduates who applied but Father Blatter supported me and I was eventually selected.

Q. HSAY :

Which year was that ?

SA :

This was in 1926. It was an interesting job but after two years I got rather tired of saying the same thing again and again and wanted some outdoor activity. My interest was ecology from the very beginning. In those days the word ecology was hardly known to anybody, but now everybody talks of ecology and ecosystem.

Well, so I got study leave from the Society for 15 to 18 months. I was corresponding with various museums but the British museum gave a very luke-warm response. In those days Indians had a very difficult time. As the political movement was going on the British Museum was not at all cooperative and so they were very half hearted about having me there. However I got in touch with Professor Stressemann at the Berlin University Zoological Museum. He was most cordial and said you come along and we will do the best we can. So I took a collection of birds that had recently come from Burma. I took that collection with me to work out with Stressemann and to learn all the little tricks about systematic ornithology. He was very kind indeed and took a lot of trouble and spent a lot of his time and worked with me and showed me exactly how it is all done, and what was the significance of various parameters that are used. So I got a very good grounding in about 9 months with him. After that I went to the British Museum just to see what they were doing because the British Museum had amassed a lot of Indian material.



Q. HSAY :

Even now they are supposed to have the best collection?

SA :

Well, they have a most complete collection, there is no doubt about that. The American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) and one or two other Museums, the Chicago Museum and the National Museum, which is part of the Smithsonian Institution are also very good. But for Indian birds, certainly the British Museum is the best and you cannot do any work unless you consult the collection of the British Museum. Now there was one Lord Rothschild who had also got a very excellent collection. He was particularly interested in birds and a very wealthy man. He sent on his own account collectors to all parts of the world to collect birds. He had built up a most wonderful collection, and of Indian Birds also. With the British Museum collection and the Rothschild collection there was no other Museum one could approach better. But this Lord Rothschild, I do not know what happened to him, whether he suddenly lost interest in birds or what, but he quietly arranged a deal with the AMNH to sell his collection to them. I think at one stage he mentioned to the British Museum about this but wanted a fantastic amount. But they offered him something less. They said it is a national collection and they can't really afford much more. So quietly he offered his collections to AMNH, New York. They of course had plenty of money and they immediately closed the deal. And the poor British people were left with their mouths open (Laughter). They did not know what to do. They had lost this part of the collection, which went to the AMNH. That collection is one of the best and anybody who wants to do anything on Indian birds must consult that collection also. When I came back after study (15 months) the first news I heard was that my job had been axed because the Government of Bombay had a financial deficit and they could not afford to keep the scheme going and so it was finished. The society was even poorer than what it is now (1982) and was run on a small scale. So when this Government grant for this Guide Lecturer came to an end I was thrown out. They had no other job for me. I then tried all kinds of things in the commercial line because at one stage when I had come for a year's holiday from Burma to Bombay, I had taken a course in Commerce and Higher Accountancy.

Yes, but I had done it for our own business because we had just started our business without any knowledge or without any background. So I thought it was a good idea to know something about what we are doing. I went through a course. Then I tried all kinds of jobs for a long time. Finally I said that well I have all these trainings and I have my chief interest in birds so why should I not do this on my own. My wife had a little money and I had a little investment and so on.

Then we worked out and found that we had just enough if we left Bombay, which was very expensive and went to live in some quieter place which would give more facilities for bird study, we will be far happier. My great fortune was that my wife who had all her education in England and been used to quite a different sort of life to what she would have in this kind of work that I wished to do. She insisted that I should

take up only the work that I was interested to do. She said "now we have enough to live quietly, and we would go to some small place, I will be quite happy". She was very keen on poetry and Urdu and various kinds of reading and so on. Then she got very interested in birds too, and in outdoor life and in things she had never had any experience in England (Note: For the students of ornithology it would be of some interest to mention here that some Indian Birds are named after his wife Tehmina. An example is the golden backed three-toed woodpecker which is scientifically known as *Dinopium benghalensis tehmini*).

Q. HSAY :

How was she in England ? Were her parents there ?

SA :

Yes, her parents were there. Her father was in Pearl business and also in the Indian Council in London. They also came back when the first world war started. Then I told Prater, look we have so many places in India where we know nothing about birds. Hyderabad for instance, was a complete blank on the ornithological map. So I said if you write to the British Residents who are really interested in these kinds of things we can probably get some financial support. I do not want any pay. I only want my expenses paid and I will be quite happy to go and study and collect birds. So the Society got in touch with the Hyderabad Government which had largely British heads of Departments. They were very glad. But it is really quite laughable the amount we asked for, and which we got and in which I was able to complete the survey. I think for the whole of Hyderabad state survey for six months we got about 6,000 Rupees.

Q. HSAY :

Six thousand ?

Yes, six thousand which included the food of skinner, our own food, cost of travelling and everything (Laughter)! We were able to do it with a lot of trouble, many of our camp shifts had to be done by bullock carts because there were no roads in the places where we were camping. After Hyderabad I did Kerala which was at that time two States — Cochin and Travancore. Then one after the other Central India, Gwalior, Indore, Bhopal. So all these were done under the same system: asking for small amounts and doing it. I could do it because I had the time, I mean, I was just doing it and nothing else and I did not have any ambition to try again for some bigger job somewhere and so on. Not because bigger jobs were not there and perhaps I would have not got them, but also they were not in the line with what I was interested in.

Now when I look back, I think the chief of the chiefest factors that made me continue with ornithology was my wife because you really cannot do much if you do not have a like minded companion.

Q. HSAY :

Thank you very much Sir.





Notes on Conservation of Cormorants and the vanishing White winged duck

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It is very welcome news that a specialist group on cormorants has been formed under the aegis of IWRB (Newsletter for International Waterfowl Census, February 1994). It is indeed high time that the cause of this rather neglected group of birds is taken up seriously.

Though still found in good numbers, with the fast and steady decline of wetlands the future of cormorants in India is far from being secured. Even before taking up ornithology as my main profession, I recall seeing hundreds of cormorants in the rivers and canals around our village in the 60s and 70s. One of my brothers-in-law was a great *shikari* (fowler) and cormorants used to be usual birds in his bag. At that time I knew only the local name of the cormorant, 'Pankawua', meaning the 'crow of water'. After taking up field ornithology as my full time occupation in 1977, I have had the opportunity of conducting ornithological surveys and studies in many parts of the country. Although I do not have quantitative data, I presume that the populations of all three Indian cormorants, great (*Phalacrocorax carbo*), Indian (*P. fuscicollis*) and little cormorant (*P. niger*) are declining mainly on account of habitat destruction. The fourth species pygmy cormorant (*P. pygmaeus*) remains a rare vagrant (Ali & Ripley 1969). The population decline of Indian cormorants is noticeable all over its range.

Earlier, while travelling by train or bus, it used to be a common sight to see cormorants foraging and perching in canals and other water bodies along the way, but such sights are now-a-days far less common. As reported by Rose & Scott (1994), elsewhere too the population trend of several other cormorant species is on the decline. One of the clearest example of this is the sharp decline in population and range of the Socotra Cormorant *P. nigrogularis*, a endemic species of the Arabian Peninsula (Symens et al, 1993).

There may be a combination of reasons for the population decline of cormorants. Nonetheless, in India the following factors are the most obvious.

1. *Decline in wetlands/feeding area*: It is a known fact that the wetlands are declining globally and more so in India (Yahya 1991, 1992). In Bihar and adjoining Bengal there used to be many low lying areas as an outcome of annual floods. Though floods still occur, the permanent *chaurs* and *chanps* (local names of swamp and water logged areas where fishing and paddy cultivation was traditionally carried out) are vanishing rapidly. With the help of modern agricultural facilities, such as pumping sets and tractors, the water from wetlands is drained out and lowlands are being levelled. As a result more uplands are created and wheat farming is replacing paddy farming. Many wetland habitats

are also reclaimed for housing and industries. Since cormorants chiefly fish in these areas, with the alternation of wetlands their food resources are reduced. Furthermore, with highly sophisticated nylon nets used for fishing now, even the smallest fish is over-exploited commercially, thus depriving the cormorants of their chief food. The large scale cultivation of Makhana *Euryale ferox* (an aquatic thorny floating plant) in North Bihar is further reducing the foraging habitat for many waterfowl. During a recent survey of wetlands of Assam (Yahya 1994) the cormorants were not recorded in their usual large numbers. In parts of Dibru-Shaikhowa Wildlife Sanctuary fishing was recorded by day and by night. According to a recent report (The Hindustan Times 17.03.1994) Chilka Lake in Orissa, a wetland of international importance, is dwindling fast and 15,000 of its birds were massacred in the winter of 1994. A Prawn Culture Project has further damaged the ecology of Chilka. In Karnataka too most of the wetlands are under threat due to various kinds of human interference. In five years of monitoring wetland degradation, Sridhar (1992) recorded that the major threat is caused by sedimentation (146 sites), partial reclamation (82 sites), mudlifting and brick making (78 sites), excessive growth of vegetation (72 sites), hunting and trading birds (67 sites) and eutrophication (22 sites). Almost similar is the situation in other parts of the country.

2. *Pollution of wetlands* : The traditional discharge of industrial wastes into wetlands has very adversely affected the quality of the riverine system and wetlands of the country. In Karnataka alone during the study mentioned above, Sridhar found that 51 wetlands are threatened through pollution of domestic sewage, 14 by industrial waste, 17 by pesticides and fertilizers and eight by solid waste dumping. Though many aquatic birds are still recorded feeding in such polluted habitats, their future remains a question mark. In such places eutrophication frequently takes place and over time the habitat is altered completely. Such changes have been reported from the world famous Keoladeo bird National Park, Bharatpur. Despite huge expense, the 'clean Ganga' project could not bring any noticeable changes in the Ganga river ecology. Due to heavy pollution the Yamuna waters near Delhi and Agra are declared unsafe for human consumption.

3. *Hunting and poaching* : Despite passing the Wildlife Protection Act in 1972, large scale hunting and poaching of waterfowl is still continuing in many parts of the country. Many species of birds are commonly sold in local markets, especially in winter. Though ducks are most favoured, on several occasions I have seen cormorants being sold along with other species.

4. *Lack of conservation awareness* : Despite encouraging efforts by NGOs and wildlife departments, the conservation awareness in India has not caught up and the majority of people still do not know the concept of 'sustainable use' of natural resources. Therefore, there is an urgent need of a country-wide Nature Conservation Awareness Campaign to safeguard the future of India's wildlife.

Conservation measures to be taken

I think initially the following may help to improve the situation.

1. A country-wide annual count especially for cormorants should be launched. Breeding trends can be established by regular counts of the occupied nests in selected heronries. Known ornithological/wildlife institutions/organisations and Chief Wildlife Wardens of each state and Union Territory should be involved in such a project. Special count forms may be sent to the AWB coordinators to be used during winter waterfowl counts.
2. Publicise the importance of birds through all possible media, particularly so in local languages.
3. To estimate the present status and population of each species of cormorant, a country-wide survey should be undertaken and a long term study on their ecology and biology should be initiated. A collaborative effort by the Biology Departments of some local universities and wildlife departments would be quite rewarding. Besides monitoring cormorant status/population and ecology, the objective of such a study should also be to recommend conservation measures for most threatened wetlands of international importance. Criteria suggested by Rose & Scott (1994) can be followed for such recommendations.

These measures and suggestions may sound a bit too optimistic. However, if we really want to safeguard our biodiversity and are interested in maintaining the balance of nature, these are necessary.

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The Vanishing White-Winged Duck

From the publication of a preliminary Conservation Action Plan for the white-winged duck, *Cairina scutulata* by Andy Green in 1992 (IWRB Special Report No.17) and subsequent reports (Species 18: 71-72; Forktail 8: 65-82) arose a very healthy response, and several individuals and organizations became interested in its well-being. However, despite some conservation efforts, the populations of white-winged duck are declining on account of habitat degradation and poaching in all of its former range, including India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia and Indonesia (probably now extinct in Malaysia and Java).

It is indeed a matter of grave concern that the white-winged duck, which was common in northeast India in the beginning of the century, became scarcer in the middle of the century, and quickly has reached the verge of extinction. Several workers, particularly Choudhury, Ranjan Kumar, Talukdar, Yahya (TWRG Newsletters 1993-95 Vol.3-8) and Dehingia (pers. comm.), have commented on its low population density and habitat loss and have suggested various remedial measures. Hussain and Haque (1982 - in Green, 1992) have studied some aspects of breeding biology of white-winged ducks in Bangladesh, while Hansel and Evans have documented its status from Thailand and central LAO PDR respectively (TWRG Newsletters 6 and 8).

Extensive habitat loss and poaching appear to be the main reasons for its decline, along with a variety of other factors. Two successive surveys (in dry and wet seasons) were carried out in 1993 in parts of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam to ascertain its present status and habitat availability. Five key locations identified in the Action Plan were visited and 48 prospective sites were explored. Details of survey methods and results have been described elsewhere (Yahya & Raza 1993, Zoo's Print 8: 20- 21, Yahya 1993 British Eco. Soc. Bulletin 25: 17-22).

In 1992, Green estimated a total of 65 ducks; we had 26 sightings and heard calls eight times in 40 days of intensive search. All but one were recorded from Assam. The largest number of observations were made in Kakopathar Forest Range and in Dibru Shaikhowa Wildlife Sanctuary. From Arunachal Pradesh only the call of the white-winged duck near Mount Pen Nala in Namdapha Tiger Reserve was heard. Nevertheless, some suitable habitats were recorded in D'Ering, Mehao, and Pakhui Wildlife sanctuaries. While the total of 65 white-winged ducks estimated by Green may be an underestimate, 200 pairs in Assam reported by some workers appears to be an overestimation. Since the white-winged duck is rather sedentary and parochial, it is relatively easy to verify its presence in a particular area by repeated visits to ascertain the indirect information.

All remaining habitats of the white-winged duck are under severe human pressure and are subjected to further fragmentation. There is an acute shortage of suitable nesting trees. Despite preventive measures, the birds and eggs are poached frequently. Intensive use of chemicals in tea gardens may also be affecting the feeding habitats of these birds.

I have given a set of recommendations in the above cited reports. A well-coordinated and organized effort is needed to save this bird. All habitat from where the white-winged duck has been reported recently should be protected. Captive breeding programs being conducted by the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (Slimbridge), Bordubi and Namdang Tea estates (Assam), and Miao Zoo (Arunachal Pradesh) require improvements. A long-term study on its

ecology and biology, including further surveys, should be launched to prepare a scientific conservation management plan. A massive campaign involving all media should be started immediately. No reintroduction programs should be undertaken for the time being.

So far, no improvement in the status of white-winged duck has occurred beyond what was reported by Andy Green in 1992. As various reports indicate, most of its habitat is being further fragmented and if severe action is not taken many of the known populations may be eliminated within a few years. Therefore, the white-winged duck is regarded as an endangered species according to the IUCN Categories of Threat and deserves the fullest support from global conservation agencies for its survival.

Courtesy : IWRB/SSC Threatened Waterfowl Specialist Group



A Checklist of Birds of INS Rajali Naval Air-station, Arakonam, Tamilnadu

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INS Rajali naval air-station is located at a latitude of 13° North and longitude of 79°45' East in North Arcot district and 80 kms away from Madras in Tamilnadu. The name INS Rajali is given to this airport because of the abundance on black winged kite (*Elanus caeruleus*) in that area, which is locally called "Rajali".

The naval air-station has a maximum and minimum temperature varying between 40.1°C and 17.7°C. The hottest months are April and May and the coldest being December and January. We have so far recorded 113 plant species within the naval air-station. At least 18,000 saplings of different plants were planted inside the station to make the campus green and shady. Apart from the native plant species, *Acacia* and *Prosopis* are found in clusters and groves, inside the campus. Vegetation found on the North Eastern side of the operational area seems to be very thick because of the lush growth of *Prosopis*, a large number of different kinds of birds were found roosting in that area. Birds from that area were found to cross the runway in small groups thereby posing a danger to the safety of aircrafts.

The vertebrate fauna recorded so far includes 5 species of amphibians, 11 species of reptiles, 98 species of birds and 12 species of mammals. *Leucaena glauca*, *Azadirachta indica*, *Peltophorum pterocarpum*, *Delonix regia*, *Cassia siamea*, *Samanea saman*, *Borassus flabellifer*, *Morinda tinctoria*, *Pithecolobium dulce*, *Millingtonia hortensis*, *Odina wodier*, *Cassia montana*, *Syzigium jambolanum* and *Albizia lebbeck*, constitute the predominant tree species of this area, and the shrubs are chiefly represented by *Hyptis suaveolens*, *Sida acuta*, *Parthenium* sp., *Lantana camera* and *Calotropis gigantea*. The dominant herbs are *Tridax*

procumbens, *Euphorbia hirta*, *Borreria hispida*, *Tephrosia purpurea* and *Phyllanthus niruri*.

The vegetation including those cultivated in agricultural lands, availability of prey (insects, reptiles and rodents) in the campus and water bodies, situated outside the naval air-station attract a variety of birds.

A checklist of birds recorded based on the observations made from February 1995 to March 1996 is given below. A field Binocular of 7 x 50 magnification was used, whenever necessary for observations.

S.no.	Common Name	Scientific Name
Family : Columbidae		
01.	Blue rock pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
02.	Ring dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
03.	Spotted dove	<i>Streptopelia chinensis</i>
04.	Little brown dove	<i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>
Family : Sturnidae		
05.	Common myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>
06.	Brahminy myna	<i>Sturnus pagodarum</i>
Family Corvidae		
07.	House crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>
08.	Jungle crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>
09.	Indian tree pie	<i>Dendrocitta vagabunda</i>
Family : Phasianidae		
10.	Grey partridge	<i>Francolinus pondicerianus</i>
11.	Common quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>

Family : Charadriidae

- | | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 12. Red wattled lapwing | <i>Vanellus indicus</i> |
| 13. Yellow wattled lapwing | <i>Vanellus malabaricus</i> |
| 14. Little ringed plover | <i>Charadrius dubius</i> |
| 15. Common sandpiper | <i>Tringa hypoleucos</i> |
| 16. Spotted sandpiper | <i>Tringa glareola</i> |
| 17. Little stint | <i>Calidris minuta</i> |
| 18. Red shank | <i>Tringa totanus</i> |

Family : Alaudidae

- | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 19. Singing bush lark | <i>Mirafra javanica</i> |
| 20. Black bellied finch lark | <i>Eremopterix grisea</i> |
| 21. Skylark | <i>Alauda gulgula</i> |
| 22. Red-winged bush lark | <i>Mirafra erythroptera</i> |

Family : Coraciidae

- | | |
|--------------|-----------------------------|
| 23. Blue jay | <i>Coracias bengalensis</i> |
|--------------|-----------------------------|

Family Ardeidae

- | | |
|------------------|------------------------------|
| 24. Pond heron | <i>Ardeola grayii</i> |
| 25. Night heron | <i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i> |
| 26. Grey heron | <i>Ardea cinerea</i> |
| 27. Little egret | <i>Egretta garzetta</i> |
| 28. Cattle egret | <i>Bubulcus ibis</i> |

Family : Dicruridae

- | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| 29. Black drongo | <i>Dicrurus adsimilis</i> |
| 30. White bellied drongo | <i>Dicrurus caerulescens</i> |

Family : Picidae

- | | |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 31. Lesser Goldenbacked Woodpecker | <i>Dinopium benghalense</i> |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|

Family : Irenidae

- | | |
|-----------------|-------------------------|
| 32. Common iora | <i>Aegithina tiphia</i> |
|-----------------|-------------------------|

Family : Accipitridae

- | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| 33. Sparrow hawk | <i>Accipiter nisus</i> |
| 34. Black winged kite | <i>Elanus caeruleus</i> |
| 35. Shikra | <i>Accipiter badius</i> |
| 36. King vulture | <i>Sarcogyps calvus</i> |
| 37. White-backed vulture | <i>Gyps bengalensis</i> |
| 38. Hen harrier | <i>Circus cynaneus</i> |
| 39. Scavenger vulture | <i>Neophron percnopterus</i> |
| 40. Marsh harrier | <i>Circus aeruginosus</i> |
| 41. Tawny eagle | <i>Aquila rapax</i> |
| 42. Indian kestrel | <i>Falco tinnunculus</i> |
| 43. Pariah kite | <i>Milvus migrans</i> |

Family : Dicaeidae

- | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 44. Tickells flowerpecker | <i>Dicaeum erythrorhynchos</i> |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|

Family : Anatidae

- | | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 45. Common teal | <i>Anas crecca</i> |
| 46. Blue winged teal or Garganey | <i>Anas querquedula</i> |

Family : Psittacidae

- | | |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| 47. Rose ringed parakeet | <i>Psittacula krameri</i> |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|

Family : Ploceidae

- | | |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| 48. House sparrow | <i>Passer domesticus</i> |
| 49. Yellow throated sparrow | <i>Petronia xanthocollis</i> |
| 50. Baya or Weaver bird | <i>Ploceus philippinus</i> |
| 51. Spotted munia | <i>Lonchura punctulata</i> |
| 52. White throated munia | <i>Lonchura malabarica</i> |
| 53. Black - headed munia | <i>Lonchura malaacca</i> |

Family : Alcedinidae

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 54. White breasted kingfisher | <i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i> |
| 55. Common kingfisher | <i>Alcedo atthis</i> |
| 56. Lesser pied kingfisher | <i>Ceryle rudis</i> |

Family : Apodidae

- | | |
|-----------------|-------------------------|
| 57. Palm swift | <i>Cypsiurus parvus</i> |
| 58. House swift | <i>Apus affinis</i> |

Family : Phalacrocoracidae

- | | |
|----------------------|----------------------------|
| 59. Little cormorant | <i>Phalacrocorax niger</i> |
|----------------------|----------------------------|

Family : Motacillidae

- | | |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 60. Large pied wagtail | <i>Motacilla maderaspatensis</i> |
| 61. Yellow wagtail | <i>Motacilla flava</i> |
| 62. Grey wagtail | <i>Motacilla caspica</i> |
| 63. Indian or paddy field pipit | <i>Anthus novaeseelandiae</i> |

Family : Muscicapidae

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 64. Tailor bird | <i>Orthotomus sutorius</i> |
| 65. Magpie robin | <i>Copsychus saularis</i> |
| 66. Indian robin | <i>Saxicoloides fulicata</i> |
| 67. Pied bushchat | <i>Saxicola caprata</i> |
| 68. White headed babbler | <i>Turdoides affinis</i> |
| 69. Large grey babbler | <i>Turdoides malcolmi</i> |
| 70. Plain wren warbler | <i>Prinia subflava</i> |
| 71. Blyths reed warbler | <i>Acrocephalus dumetorum</i> |
| 72. Steaked fantail warbler | <i>Cisticola juncidis</i> |

Family : Cuculidae

- | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 73. Crow-pheasant | <i>Centropus sinensis</i> |
| 74. Koel | <i>Eudynamis scolopaeca</i> |
| 75. Pied crested cuckoo | <i>Clamator jacobinus</i> |
| 76. Common hawk cuckoo | <i>Cuculus varius</i> |

Family : Nectariniidae

- | | |
|---------------------|----------------------------|
| 77. Purple sunbird | <i>Nectarinia asiatica</i> |
| 78. Loten's sunbird | <i>Nectarinia lotenia</i> |

Family : Strigidae

- | | |
|-----------------|---------------------|
| 79. Spotted owl | <i>Athene brama</i> |
| 80. Barn owl | <i>Tyto alba</i> |

Family : Upupidae

- | | |
|------------|--------------------|
| 81. Hoopoe | <i>Upupa epops</i> |
|------------|--------------------|

Family : Pycnonotidae

- | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------|
| 82. Redvented bulbul | Pycnonotus cafer |
| 83. White browed bulbul | Pycnonotus luteolus |

Family : Artamidae

- | | |
|-------------------------|----------------|
| 84. Ashy swallow-shrike | Artamus fuscus |
|-------------------------|----------------|

Family : Rallidae

- | | |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| 85. White-breasted waterhen | Amaurornis phoenicurus |
| 86. Indian moorhen | Gallinula chloropus |
| 87. Coot | Fulica atra |

Family : Hirundinidae

- | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------|
| 88. Common swallow | Hirundo rustica |
| 89. Wire tailed swallow | Hirundo smithii |

Family : Meropidae

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|
| 90. Green bee-eater | Merops orientalis |
| 91. Chestnut headed bee-eater | Merops leschenaulti |

Family : Oriolidae

- | | |
|-------------------|-----------------|
| 92. Golden oriole | Oriolus oriolus |
|-------------------|-----------------|

Family : Laniidae

- | | |
|----------------------|------------------|
| 93. Baybacked shrike | Lanius vittatus |
| 94. Brown shrike | Lanius cristatus |

Family : Recurvirostridae

- | | |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| 95. Black-winged stilt | Himantopus himantopus |
|------------------------|-----------------------|

Family : Podicipedidae

- | | |
|------------------|---------------------|
| 96. Little grebe | Podiceps ruficollis |
|------------------|---------------------|

Family : Ciconidae

- | | |
|------------------------|--------------------|
| 97. White necked stork | Ciconia episcopus |
| 98. Openbill stork | Anastomus oscitans |

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Further Evidence of Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia* Breeding in North-Western India

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On the Indian subcontinent, the Caspian tern *Sterna caspia* is a fairly common species outside the breeding season along the coasts and on large freshwater bodies (Ali and Ripley 1983). A small population have been recorded breeding at a few sites: off northern Sri Lanka during May and June (Ali & Ripley 1983), and on the Astola Islands off the Makran Coast, Siranda Jheel at Sonmiani in Las Bela and Kajar Island at the mouth of the Indus in coastal Pakistan during June and July (Roberts 1991).

The first evidence of Caspian tern breeding within Indian territory is from a discovery of an inactive colony in the Little Rann in Gujarat state, northwest India (Ranjitsinh 1991). The identity of the species was confirmed on the basis of size and coloration of broken eggs and remains of chicks.

This note compiles information on observations made in the Great and Little Ranns of Kachchh in Gujarat between

1986 to 1994 to provide evidence that breeding of Caspian terns is probably more regular and widespread in this part of India than has been previously recorded.

The Little and Great Ranns are vast and uninhabited salt flats, that together span an area of about 20,720 km². They remain dry for most of the year and may get inundated during the monsoon period; the duration and degree to which this occurs, differs greatly between years and depends primarily on the volume it receives. This is controlled by the amount of precipitation and quantity of freshet that enters the Ranns, and the volume of seawater that enters the Ranns during the pre-monsoon and monsoon westerly winds and associated sea level rise (via the Kori creek into the Great Rann and the Surajbari Creek into the Little Rann). As a result, they may remain completely dry in some years and flooded for up to several months in others. Once flooded,



Northwest section of Gujarat state, showing localities mentioned in text and breeding colonies of Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia*
[Inset : Location of Gujarat state in India]

they turn into a sea of shallow water and treacherously soft sinking mud with only few scattered vegetated islands and slightly elevated areas of mud. The shallow waters are very rich in fish and crustaceans, which support a large fishing industry.

Owing to the vast expanse, remoteness and poor accessibility after the monsoon, the area has been visited only by a few ornithologists during this season. Some of the visits to the Rann have led to interesting discoveries: the famous flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* colony, great white pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus* (Ali 1945), avocet *Avosetta recurvirostra* (Ali 1960) and lesser flamingo *Phoeniconaias minor* in the Great Rann (Ali 1974) and in the Little Rann (Mundkur *et al* 1991) have been found to nest here.

In late June 1986, TM surveyed the coastal areas of western Kachchh and covered several accessible sites along the coast from Jakhau north to Lakhpur, the latter at the western end of the Great Rann. At the edge of the Kori creek at Lakhpur (Table 1, Figure 1), a minimum of 29 Caspian terns were observed in prime breeding plumage. At least four pairs were in an advanced stage of courtship; the partners performed aerial displays together and several matings were witnessed. Some of the matings lasted for up to 10 minutes at a time; during most of this period, the male stood still on the back of the female before attempting to copulate. This mating behavior is typical of the larger crested terns (Cramp 1985).

The terns were occasionally observed flying singly or in small groups to the north across the creek and returning. The surrounding areas of the creek and coastline were searched on camel-back to locate the active colony but none was found. It is likely that the terns were still in the process of courtship and had not selected a colony site. In the Caspian tern, as courtship and copulation can occur on migration and away from the breeding site (Cramp 1985); TM concluded

that the terns were still to establish a colony and that this could be located in the Great Rann, either in India or across the border in Pakistan. No further observations were made on these birds at the time.

On 7 September 1992, at the Chhari-Dhand (Table 1, Figure 1), JKT observed Caspian terns fishing. The terns were carrying fish in their bills and repeatedly flying off with these towards the direction of the Luna and Hajipur villages that are located on the southern border of the Great Rann. A search was made to locate any signs of a colony there, during the course of which about 30 km² were checked. A search beyond the villages was not possible due to the flooded state of the Rann.

Observations were made at Chhari-Dhand on several occasions by JKT and SNV during the course of about a month. During this period, adult terns were observed taking fish away and later in the month they were joined by newly fledged juveniles (please refer to Table 2 for notes on



Chick & egg of Caspian tern

observations). We presume that a smaller number of terns must have bred, possibly on a remote island called a "bet" in the flooded Rann, and that at least some of the adults depended on the Chhari-Dhand as a source of food to feed their growing young.

In late 1992, PM and staff of the Little Rann of Kachchh Sanctuary collected some egg shells and dead chicks of the Caspian tern from a colony site on Khezadi Bet, about 5 km south of Rapar Bet in the Little Rann (Table 1, Figure 1). This is about 19 km west of the site where Ranjitsinh (1991) had previously found eggs shells and dead chicks of Caspian tern in December 1988. On 2 March 1993, JKT visited the Khezadi Bet and found that the colony was inactive. This small patch of raised land (about 300 m long and 200 m wide) was standing dry in the brackish water of the Rann. To confirm the identity of the species, some more remnants of



Khezadio-Bet Nesting Site of Caspian terns

the colony were collected; these were also found to be eggs of the Caspian tern. This visit was followed by another to the site on 9 April 1994. At least ten nests with broken eggs were found (Figure 2). A knowledgeable villager who has been observing the birds nesting at this site since 1992, confirmed that the terns had bred between November and December 1993, and that there had been at least 200 nests of the Caspian Tern. Along with the terns, three other species of birds also nested on this island although the identity of these remains unknown.

The observations made by us between 1986 and 1994 confirm that the Caspian tern has bred at a minimum of three sites in the Ranns. It would appear that the precise time of



Eggs of Caspian terns Clutch Size (4)

year when the birds could breed here appears to be primarily controlled by the appearance of temporary islands that are suitable for nesting, which in turn is dependent on the flooding regime of the Ranns. For example, the 1992 monsoon was abnormally heavy in Kachchh and in some areas more than 760 mm of precipitation were recorded against the annual of about 380 mm. This caused the Ranns to flood from about September to March that gives the terns an adequate time to breed. In 1993 we know that the terns bred here between November and December. The breeding

Table 1. Evidence of Caspian Terns breeding in north-western India

Location	Habitat	Period of observation	Evidence of breeding	Observer
Great Rann of Kachchh				
Lakhpat 25°54'N, 68°55'E	At the edge of Kori Creek	24-25 June 1986	29 adults in breeding plumage. Courtship, aerial displays and matings observed	TM
Chhari Dhand 23.15°N, 69.49'	Seasonal wetland, Banni Grassland	7 Sept 1992 to 11 Oct 1992	Small numbers of adults catching fish and carrying them back towards the Luna and Hajipir villages. In early October, juveniles joining adults at the Dhand	JKT, SNV
Little Rann of Kachchh				
Khezadio Bet 23°30'N, 71°07'E	Small temporary island	late 1992	Remains of an active colony - few egg shells and desiccated chicks collected	PM
		2 March 1993	Egg shells and dead chicks collected	JKT
		9 April 1994	Ten old nests with eggs	JKT
Pung Bet 23°31'N, 71°16'E	Small temporary island	December 1988	Remains of an active colony - few egg shells and desiccated chicks	Ranjitsinh (1991)
Khezadio Bet 23°30'N, 71°07'E	Small temporary island	1 October 1994	About 300 nests, 500 egg, 100 chicks, and 1500 adult caspians terns	JKT, SNV

season of the terns in the Rann is quite different from elsewhere in the region. In Pakistan they breed in June-July (Roberts 1991) and in Sri Lanka between May and June (Ali and Ripley 1983). It is likely that the difference in the time of breeding at these places occurs due to the temporary availability of safe nesting sites.

The volume of water entering the Ranns has been declining in the last many years as a result of construction of a number of irrigation and water supply dams along the seasonal rivers that feed into the area. Due to the irregularity of the flooding, it is likely that the terns may only be able to successfully breed in some years.

Finally on 1st October 1984, JKT and SNV, found an active colony of Caspian terns on Khezadio-Bet in the little Rann. Hence this is the first positive evidence of the nesting of Caspian terns in India.

The Staff of the Border Security Force kindly provided a camel for an initial survey of the Lakhpatt area and we are grateful for their support. Muhammad, a local assistant employed by the Bombay Natural History Society willingly helped out at Chhari Dhand. Shahid Ali, MK Himmatsinhji, SA Hussain, Dr AR Rahmani, TJ Roberts and Anthony C.

Sebastian kindly provided useful comments on earlier drafts of this note and we acknowledge their kind contribution.

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Belikere Lake — A New Foraging Site for Spotbilled Pelicans (*Pelecanus philippensis*)

Dr (Ms) M.V. RAMA, No.2821, 9th Cross, V V Mohalla, Mysore 570 002

Bilikere village is almost midway between Mysore and Hunsur (27 kms from Mysore) and has a population of 4002. Bilikere Lake having an area of about 99 acres is between Hullenahalli and Bilikere village and is to the left side of state highway No.88 (from Mysore). The lake does not dry up fully even during summer months.

Since August 1991, I have been regularly observing this lake for bird life, as I commute between Mysore and Hunsur. Hunsur is 26 kms from Bilikere. The common wetland birds which I have been able to identify in and around the lake are, little egret (*Egretta garzetta*), cattle egret (*Bubulcus ibis*), little cormorant (*Phalacrocorax niger*), spot billed duck (*Anas poecilorhyncha*), wiretailed swallow (*Hirundo Smithii*), painted stork (*Mycteria leucocephala*), grey heron (*Ardea cinerea*), Pond heron (*Ardeola grayii*), Little grebe (*Podiceps ruficollis*), pied wagtail (*Motacilla* sp), black bellied tern (*Sterna acuticauda*), white breasted kingfisher (*Halcyon symmensis*), purple moorhen (*Porphyrio porphyrio*), common sand piper (*Tringa hypoleucos*), red wattled lapwing (*Vanellus indicus*), lesser pied kingfisher (*Ceryle rudis*), coot (*Fulica atra*) and white ibis (*Threskiornis aethiopica*).

On 2nd July 1996, during my usual observation at 7.30 am I was thrilled by the sight of four spotbilled pelicans fishing in the lake. On third July at the same time, I noticed a large flock of them, which were never seen during my earlier eager looks at the lake for new species. Then I started visiting the lake at different hours. On enquiring the villagers who have been using the lake regularly for various purposes, including fishing, since decades, say that these big birds are new to the lake and have never seen them before. However about 10% of them say that a few big birds of that kind come once in a way in small number of 10 to 20.

The number of pelicans were counted between 7.00 and 10.00 am for five days from 20th to 24th July 1996. There were 80 to 90 of them floating buoyantly with the characteristic way of group fishing. Sometimes a few of them used to rest on the bank next to or along with the little cormorants. On 21st and 22nd between 1.00 and 3.00 pm there were only 50-60 of them, on 23rd at 4.15 pm twentyfive from the flock, were seen circling high in thermals and soaring. Finally they flew away with 'V' formation towards the East of the lake. Everyday they are arriving here early in the morning before Sunrise and leaving in batches till late in the

evening. At least 10 birds were seen foraging even at 6.30 pm.

These pelicans must be coming from Kokre Bellur, their nesting site, which is 65 kms away from Bilikere. They have been reported to visit lakes at Sulekere, Maddur, Malavalli and surrounding areas within 50 kms in search of food (NLBW, Vol.35, No.2, 1995).

Though Bilikere lake is free from industrial effluents it is polluted by the human activities such as washing clothes, cattle and vehicles. Women of both Hullenahalli and Bilikere use the lake water intensively all through the year for washing clothes. During these days there was a meagre fishing operation going on. Pollution from agricultural run off is another serious matter to be considered as it can reduce

the fish population. Villagers are indeed happy about these rare visitors. In case Kokre Bellur even now has 300 to 350 pelicans (NLBW, Vol.35, No.2, 1995), nearly 30% of the population has come to this lake for foraging. The cause for the shift in their foraging habitat this season can be an alarm; for their earlier habitats might have become less fit or unfit to support them.

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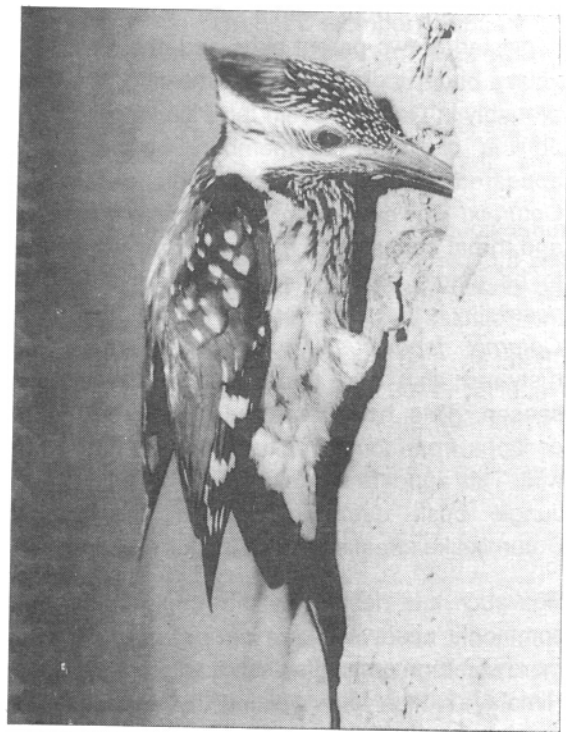
First Record of the Lesser Golden Backed Woodpecker Nesting in an Earthen Wall

TAKUR DALIP SINGH, 549-A, 9th A Main, 1st Stage, Indiranagar, Bangalore 560 038

Woodpeckers normally nest by making holes on the tree branches. These primary hole nesters are popularly known as the carpenters of the forest. In Dr Salim Ali's book of Indian Birds and other bird literature there is no record of the golden backed woodpecker nesting in a mud wall.

My farm is in Romie Tehsil, of Sirsa District of Haryana, very near to Rajasthan border. During the harvesting season (April 1991) in Haryana, when I arrived at the farm my workers told me that a large bird was nesting in a hole in the mud wall. When I visited the spot, I was surprised to see a nest just three and half feet from the ground in a mud wall, which was in the compound of a small religious building, where people frequently came to offer prayers. The nest was active and under the shade of a banyan tree, where people usually come for an afternoon siesta during the hot summer days. I inspected the nest and found only one chick inside. Later, I identified the bird as a lesser golden backed woodpecker. The chick was very small, and I thought that it might take a few more days for it to put out its head from the nest, so that I could take action photographs of the parents feeding the chick. The parents were not shy of my presence and photographic equipment which was placed at a distance of only four feet from the nest. This is the first record of nesting of woodpeckers in a mud wall.

A pair of brahminy mynas tried several times to take over the nest, particularly in the absence of the parent woodpeckers. But one day one of the mynas, entered the hole and stayed inside for some time. We were very worried about the woodpecker chick, but we were helpless. Then one of the parent woodpeckers came and entered the nest, where (after a lot of struggle — I presume) it forced the brahminy myna to get out. Then we made another hole at some distance on the same wall, to keep the mynas busy. The mynas accepted this man made nest and this in turn enabled the woodpecker to complete its nesting cycle without hindrance.



Even though I am not 100% sure, it seems that the woodpecker themselves have made the nest. Secondly, the shape of the nest also suggested that it was made by the woodpeckers according to their requirements.

We have more than 100 species of birds at our farm. The barbets sometime nest on tree branches at just around three feet above the ground, which shows that they are relatively undisturbed here because of the religious sentiments of the people of this area.



Lt. Col. GAUTAM DAS (Retd.), R-136, Greater Kailash, Part-I, New Delhi 110 048

I would like to receive the comments of your readers on a few observations on birds that are given below :

- 1 In September 1995 I observed a group of five roseringed parakeets harassing a shikra in flight well above tree top level within the city of New Delhi. The parakeets were staying above the shikra but making repeated dives at the hawk, and wheeling and circling close above. Is this kind of behaviour common? In the 40 years that I have been observing birds, I have never noticed this before.
- 2 On December 6, 1995, while driving along a "kaccha" forest road between Kalagarh and Ramnagar, that runs along the southern boundary of the Corbett National Park in UP, a covey of quail crossed the road a few feet ahead of my car. They then entered the short grass on the side of the road where I was able to observe them quite clearly from within the vehicle. The covey consisted of two parent birds and about six half-grown young birds, indicating a late nesting after the rains, probably in October. From the pale longitudinal streaks on the backs of all members of the covey, they appeared at first glance to belong to the genus *Coturnix*. However, from the prominent rusty-red chin and throat colouring of the male, they were more likely to be jungle bush quail. The other, though remote, possibility is that they were a family of *Japaneses quail*, *Coturnix japonicus*, in which the male acquires rusty-red chin and throat feathers in the breeding season. This however, would imply that they were escapes from some poultry farm and had bred in the wild. This appears unlikely, and the quail were probably Jungle bush quail, in spite of the profusion of *Coturnix*-like streaks on their backs.

Has such late nesting by the jungle bush quail been commonly observed? Are pale streaks on the backs more common on jungle bush quail from the base of the Himalaya? Has any nesting by escaped domestic Japanese quail been reported anywhere in our country?
- 3 In May 1996, I observed a nest of a hoopoe at ground level in our neighbourhood park. The nest was between the roots of a White Mulberry ("katwa" tree), *Morus alba*. The nest contained a well-grown nestling, ready to leave the nest when I last looked. The park is home to

Quails, Hoopoes and Ducks

mongooses and to Common Musk-shrews, which could easily have robbed the nest before the nestling grew to this stage. Are nests of the hoopoe at ground level a common occurrence? Do hoopoes, or their nests or young, possess some offensive odour (or unpleasant taste) which deters predators?

- 4 My children, who were camping at Dodi Tal, at about 11,000 feet in the Uttarkashi district of the UP Himalayas on 15th May 1996, reported seeing a black and white water bird of almost domestic duck size at the far end of the lake. The description matches only that of the male Tufted duck, the male goosander, or a great crested grebe. Have any of these three species been reported from Dodi Tal at that time of year?

Nesting of Spotbilled Duck along the River Yamuna Near Delhi

The Spotbilled duck (*Anas poecilorhyncha*) is fairly common in and around Delhi throughout the year, both at small, reedy waterbodies and in the reed-beds and marsh grasses of the River Yamuna.

Dr Salim Ali in "the Book of Indian Birds" has stated that the nesting season of the Spotbill is ill-defined and is primarily during the south west monsoon (July-Sept.). It might be of interest to readers that two nests have been observed near Delhi in April - early May 1996, one containing 10 eggs and the other twelve. The Handbook (Ali & Ripley) mentions the possibility of two broods a year.

It has been reported by a local that spotbills have been seen to carry ducklings between their feet if the nest-site is disturbed. has this been observed anywhere else, or authentically reported?

The other observed resident ducks of the Delhi area are the nukta (comb duck) (*Sarkidiornis melanotus*) and the cotton-teal (now renamed cotton pygmy-goose) (*Nettapus coromandelianus*), of which the nukta is the commoner, though both are present in much smaller numbers than the spotbill. In fact, I have only seen one pair of cotton-teal in the immediate vicinity of the city of Delhi-New Delhi. The nukta appears to be commoner along the River Yamuna and within a few km on either side from North Delhi northwards, than besides the city or along the river towards the south.

Correspondence

BANDED CRAKES and CRANES IN COORG. LT. GEN. B.C. NANDA ((Retd), General Thimaya Circle, Madikeri 571 201, Kodagu, Karnataka

Please refer to my letter of 6th September 1996. Once again I have a bird dash against my garage wall on the night of 20/21 October 96. This time it is a banded crane. I found the bird lying dead next to my garage wall on the morning of 21-10-96.

On checking out I find that Salim Ali in his Book on Indian Birds 1979, described the bird as "slaty legged banded crane (*Rallina eurizonoides*) Lt. Col. H.P. Baker in his book Birds of Southern India, 1930 gives the best description of the specimen, I found. He refers to this bird as *Rallina superciliaris superciliaris*.

Baker goes on to quote Mr. Bell's account in the BNHSJ, Volume XIV page 393, wherein Bell reports that banded crane was a fairly common bird in the jungles along the coast

of "Kanara" during the monsoon. His observations are dated 1898.

Hume and Marshall in Game birds in India, Pakistan etc., 1879 reprinted 1994, Volume II refers to the bird as *Rallina Eurizonoides*. They also go on to state that another variation from the Malay Peninsula is referred to as *Rallina fasciata superciliaris*.

This time I was lucky to have a camera handy and managed to take a few shots, two of which I am enclosing for your study.

I may add that my house is located at an altitude of 4300 feet above sea level on a ridge line, just above a saddle. On both sides are deep valleys with streams and paddy fields. Perhaps the two birds that I have reported were moving from one set of paddy fields to the other at night, when they became disoriented by my security light.

Perhaps I should put off my security light during these months.

Cranes in Coorg

On 8th December 1996 at 1.15 p.m. in the afternoon (1315 hrs) while I was having my lunch I observed through the window three large birds circling over a valley that I overlook. By the time I got my binoculars and went outside the birds had gained considerable height. Unfortunately it was a cloudy afternoon with intense glare and hence it was not possible to pick up any details beyond the fact that they were definitely cranes.

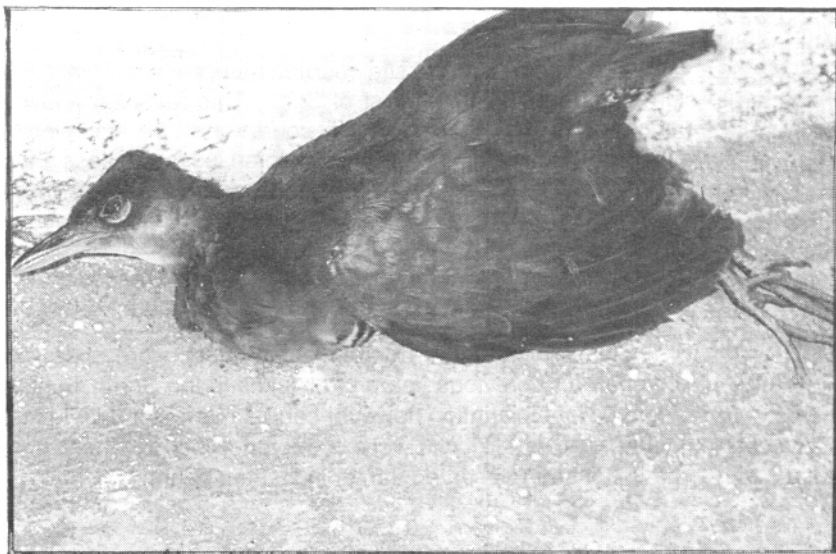
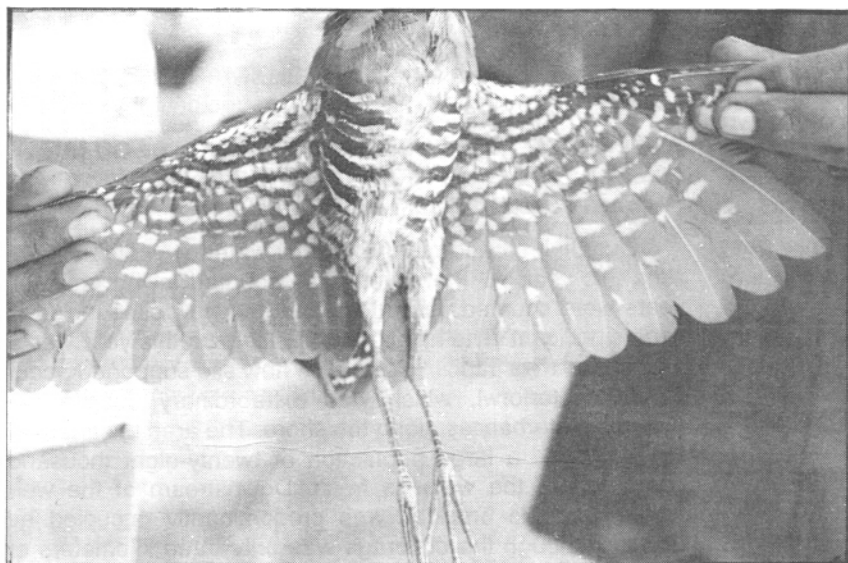
My house is located at approximately 12°30'N latitude and therefore it is unlikely that these were common cranes, *Grus grus* (Linnaeus) as these birds have not normally been seen south of a general line along 18° N latitude. I can therefore only presume that these birds were Demoiselle cranes, *Anthropoides Virgo* (Linnaeus)

This is the very first time that I have observed any cranes in Coorg. I wonder if you have any reports of such sightings.



OCCURRENCE OF CHRISTMAS FRIGATE BIRD. MANEESH KUMAR P. and MANOJ KUMAR P. 1/415, Pushpanjali, Kalpathy, Palakkad 678 003

Bordering the district Malapuram (Kerala) lies our lucky site - Puduponnani Estuary. On 29.8.93 at



3.00 pm, watching the gulls and terns passing by, we were astonished at the sight of a long black bird that emerged from the flocks of white gulls. Its long slender wings and deeply forked tail helped us to recognise it unmistakably as a frigate bird. And when the bird neared us its orangish bill curved at the end and the prominent white patch at its belly were conspicuous.

Further on the information gathered aided us to identify it as Christmas frigate bird - *Fregata andrewsi*.

Soon after it made a wonderful display in the open, frequently attacking the Brahmini kites and making elegant dives in to the sea. Often it flew at sea level to procure its food, and after an hour of activity near the shore it flew away over the sea.

Not more than a couple of sightings of this bird are recorded in Kerala. The checklist of birds found in Kerala as per "THE BOOK OF KERALA BIRDS" excludes the "CHRISTMAS FRIGATE BIRD". Hence their sighting is valuable.



BLACK-NECKED GREBES and GREAT CRESTED GREBES IN GUJARAT. S. THEODORE BASKARAN, 1, Sanchar, Ahmedabad 380 006

In the western tip of Gujarat is the pilgrimage town Dwaraka. When you take the road from Jamnagar to Dwaraka, you have to cross a stretch of marshy mud flat, which is in fact an intrusion of the Gulf of Kutch. This spot is known as Charkla and here Tata Chemicals have vast stretches of salt pans, to supply raw materials to their factory in Mithapur, about 50 km away. Sea water is pumped into the pans and there form large bodies of water, of uniform depth. They attract large number of birds, including flamingos.

On 20.11.96 we were driving across this stretch when we noticed the congregation of birds and stopped to watch. We sighted a number of species but the star attraction for us was a flock of black-necked grebes (*Podiceps nigricollis*). There were 51 of them and were feeding in one corner of a pan, where water was being pumped in. The birds stuck to the area where water was falling from a large pipe and were actively feeding. They did not fly at our approach but merely moved a few metres away, in a tight group. I was able to take pictures easily. Slightly bigger than little grebes, these birds breed in Central Europe and West Asia and winter in India. The straight, black neck, white under parts and the group formation can be the identifying factors in the field. The red iris will confirm the identification. The Handbook describes this bird as "uncommon". When we reached Jamnagar, one from our group contacted Shatrusalya Singh (a keen birder, former Raja of Jamnagar and popularly known as Jam Saheb) and he said he has seen this bird in a few other spots in Gujarat.

This spot is extraordinarily rewarding for a birder. We saw flocks of flamingos, both varieties, spoonbills, avocets, reef herons, grey herons, large egrets, brown headed gulls, terns, Dalmatian pelicans and many waders.

One from our group spotted a dead Dalmatian pelican with a ring. I will persuade her to share the story with the readers of the Newsletter.

THE GREAT CRESTED GREBES OF PARIYEJ LAKE

Pariyej is a village on 20th km of the Kheda-Khambhat road, which branches off from the National highway number 8 connecting Ahmedabad with Vadodara. To the south-west of the village lies a sprawling lake, which irrigates the fields around. The lake is fed by a canal and so is full the year around. And for this reason quite a few waterfowl breed here. It sustains a large number of waterfowl and in one census it was as high as 20,000. On 5.9.96, a group of us from the WWF had gone to this lake. We sighted a pair of great-crested grebe and watched them for more than two hours, intermittently. What is significant was that the birds were in breeding plumage, evidence of the fact that they breed here. Other birders from the Agricultural University of Anand who were with us confirmed that they had sighted at least three pairs of these handsome birds in breeding outfit, in the past. In Gujarat the breeding of this bird has been recorded in Jamnagar and near Bhuj. I myself have set my eyes on this bird only once previously and that was at Barapani lake, near Shillong in Meghalaya in 1978.



WATERFOWL CENSUS AROUND SURAT, GUJARAT. SNEHAL PATEL and AKSHAY JOSHI, Nature Club Surat, 81, Sarjan Society, Surat 395007, Gujarat

Our Club carried out the annual waterfowl census at 11 sites this year. All the seven sites counted in the previous years were counted. In addition the four new sites included were significant. The highlight of the census this year was a weir on the river Tapi, in Surat. The new site supported about 35,000 waterfowl, which was extraordinary despite the extreme disturbances along the shore. The area upstream of the weir, had a large population of twenty-eight thousand coots, where the water is fresh. Downstream of the weir where water is brackish was predominantly occupied by ducks. Although the coverage was only three kilometers of the river, for the first time, such large concentration of waterfowl has been observed.

The other important site counted this year was Ukai Dam on river Tapi 105 Kms, east of Surat. This reservoir totaling about 200 Sq Km, could of course not be completely covered. However, in the small region covered (less than 5%) some 7,000 waterfowl were observed of which there were 4,000 pochards and 2,000 tufted ducks. These birds were observed at least half a km away. The identification was possible only with the help of a powerful telescope. This count however was carried out on 26th December, 1995.

This year a higher number of waterfowl were observed compared to previous years at all lakes in the South Gujarat region. No explanation however can be made, for this. In fact many species of ducks were observed at lakes, where they have not been observed earlier in last ten years.

In conclusion, the weir at river Tapi, turned out to be a new site for very large congregation or waterfowl. Throughout the winter the weir supported such large number of waterfowl.

However about hundred people have started trapping these birds using crude traps. The weir being located in very populous part of the city, is constantly disturbed, along the shore. Efforts are being made by our club to prevent this poaching of birds and provide protection with the help of forest department. Whether this new site becomes a permanent wintering ground will be clear in the years to come.

We are pleased to inform the readers of newsletter that a forest department official accompanied us in plain clothes and coots trapped by fishermen were bought at their selling rate of 35 Rupees and the trappers were caught red-handed and booked for trapping and selling wild birds under the wild life act. Since then the trapping activity has decreased. Jointly with forest department we are planning to put up boards along the river indicating that trapping of birds is illegal and trappers can be jailed.



KESTRELS IN RANIKHET. JASEEM BAKHSH, Centre for Wildlife & Ornithology, AMU, Aligarh 202 002

On 13th April 1996, I was birding near the Mall road, China View in Ranikhet range of West Almora Forest Division in Uttar Pradesh. I came across two kestrels possibly of East Himalayan race (*Falco tinnunculus interstitus*). They were catching winged termites emerging from the wet ground.

The sky was cloudy and most of the diurnal birds were about to retire. I was fascinated to see that the kestrels were catching insects by air-sallying.



BIRDS OF SAMPE (MYSORE). MRS. PRAGATI NAYAK, "Aashirwad", Sampe, P.O. Aryapu, Puttur 574210

We live in the country - a few kilometers away from the town of Puttur. My family owns a saw-mill and we live next to it. Cut logs are stacked behind the mill and there are plenty of birds which remain in the vicinity of the logs - mainly robins, magpie-robins, woodpeckers, coucals and kingfishers. In the mango and jackfruit trees near the mill one sees drongos and racket-tailed drongos, doves and orioles. Unfortunately, I do not know the botanical names of the many trees and shrubs here. One particularly huge tree (locally called "golimara") attracts many birds - bee-eaters, flycatchers (paradise, grey-headed, blacknaped), barbets and woodpeckers. There are plenty of insects like dragonflies here which is why probably so many birds come here.

Our house is surrounded on all sides by coconut and areca palms and plantains. There are many fruit-trees like mango, guava, chikoo, papaya and jackfruit. We also have

many flowering plants like varieties of rose, jasmine, hibiscus, allamanda and lantana. Sunbirds, flower-peckers, tailor birds and bulbuls are always to be seen here.

There is no water around here as far as I know. In order to irrigate our many coconut palms and plantains, we have attached pipes to carry used water from washbasins, sinks and bathrooms. Sometimes huge puddles are formed on the ground because of this. Many birds come to drink from these puddles - wagtails, white-throated ground thrushes, etc.

Birds like parakeets, lorikeets, munias and chloropsis come in flocks and are seen only in the mornings and evenings. Minivets and cuckoo-shrikes too are occasional visitors.

An areca tree near our gate has been converted into a multistoreyed building by the birds. There are four nest-holes in this tree built one above the other giving the tree the appearance of a flute. The original hole was made by a golden-backed woodpecker. I am not sure about the architects of the remaining three holes. The holes are occupied by different birds - woodpecker, barbet and myna. Some of the holes are probably connected. Once I watched a woodpecker going into one hole and reappearing from the one above it after a few seconds.



BLACK BREASTED WEAVER BIRDS. AASHEESH PITTIE, 8-2-545 "Prem Parvat", Road No. 7, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500 034, India

I will send a note shortly, on the Blackbreasted Weaver *Ploceus benghalensis* nesting in Hyderabad area, for the Newsletter. The interesting point about this note is not just the nesting of the birds (which extends their breeding range), but the plumage of the males. They have got white faces (to put it crudely) vis-avis the brown-faced birds illustrated and described in our references books! Some preliminary research has revealed that a couple of authors, Jerdon and also Oates (over a hundred years ago!) have described this plumage. But why have subsequent works (the Handbook and also the Fauna!) ignored it completely? Exciting possibilities tempt us! New sub-species (! ?) being the most fantastic. Perhaps it is just a forgotten plumage. It will take some time before any conclusion can be reached. (Specimens have been sent to the bird room at BNHS and have been seen by Mr. Abdulali). In the meantime, birdwatchers in the country can keep their binoculars handy!

Since a week, there is suddenly, an influx of birds in the garden. Paradise flycatchers, a flashy blueheaded rock thrush (!), the ethereal music of Tickell's blue flycatchers, grey and whitebellied drongos, and just now, as I write and glance out of the window, a booted eagle, riding thermals between here and the airport, parrying dives by a pariah kite, miraculous and enigmatic in its appearance, spreading gladness in the heart that the world still ticks to a mysterious clock, the rhythm of whose pendulum is unfathomable! I would that "conferences" were made of these more than anything else.



THE SILENCE OF THE SONGBIRDS

HARK, HARK, the lark at heaven's gate sings, but these days it's getting harder to hear one. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and seven other leading conservation bodies last week warned that 23 species are now in the highest category of concern in Britain (where there has been a 50 per cent reduction in breeding population or range over the past 25 years), including for the first time farmland birds such as the turtle dove, tree sparrow, bulfinch, reed bunting, song thrush - and the favourite skylark. A previous survey, from the last 1980's, listed just eight species in the category.

Pinning down the exact cause of decline is not always possible, but there are some obvious suspects. Farming has become much more intensive, producing a tidier countryside which is less bird-friendly. Pesticides kill off insects and seed producing weeds. The grey partridge's chicks can no longer find the fat juicy insects which they need. Seed-seeking species such as the buntings and finches suffer. Rotational cereal planting, with stubble fields ploughed up instead of being left through the winter, creates a sterile environment. So does the continuing shrinkage of hedgerows, which deprives the linnet and other species of safe nest-building sites. Villages and town suburbs are becoming zones of refuge for birds driven off the hostile land.

Most of these birds are not yet rare: the RSPB's efficient monitoring system reckons there are still a million song-thrushes around. But 25 years ago there were 2 million and the pace of decline is probably increasing. Nature - as we have seen in the beef disaster - exacts a high price for being tampered with. To confuse its enemies, the lark descends in silence for the last few metres. We shall know how much we have lost when it is silent all the way.

Guardian Weekly, April 28, 1996.



COLOURS, PAINTINGS & DUCKS. KUMARAN SATHASIVAM, 29, Jadumani Koil Street Madurai 625 001

Terms used to describe colours in natural history

Since writing my previous article on shikras with red eyes and definition of colours (Vol. 36 No.3), I have come across references to a publication, the title of which suggests that it would be useful to have at hand when putting names to colours in natural history. The publication is:

SMITHE, F.B. (1975) : Naturalist's Colour Guide, Amer.Mus.Nat.Hist., New York.

* If any readers are familiar with this work, could they please provide details about it?

I was surprised to find my article referred to by Mr. Rahul Purandare (Vol.36 No.5) as an example of a scientific article that is not clear in its purpose. I feel it is quite clear that the article is in the nature of observations and musings written

for a hobby newsletter and does not fall into the category of a technical report. It certainly made no claim to being a scientific article, though I will vouch for the accuracy of my observations contained therein. The confusion seems to be due to the application of a yardstick meant for a research paper, quite inappropriate here.

Painting by Lady Gwillim

An account of the acquisition of Lady Gwillim's bird-paintings that Dr. S. Subramanya came upon at McGill University (Vol. 34 No.4) is given by Casey A. Wood who bought them for the university, in an article titled "Lady ("Elizabeth) Gwillim, Artist and Ornithologist" in the Journal of the Bombay Natural History (Volume 31, pages 486-489). Wood goes on in his article to describe the paintings themselves, and also his search for information about the artist. It is very interesting to compare Dr. Subramanya's and Wood's descriptions of their individual discoveries of the same works of art, spaced some seventy years apart.

Domestic Ducks feeding on Houseflies

I remember an occasion, when many years ago, as a boy I went along with my father to a wedding at Virudhunagar, about fifty kilometres south of Madurai. The house where the wedding was taking place was full and we were seated on chairs in the lane outside. Open gutters at the sides lent a certain atmosphere to the setting. No doubt the numerous houseflies thought it a wonderful place. Presently, our attention was drawn to a small group of domestic ducks in our vicinity. These ducks seemed to be making swift pecks at the ground. Closer observation revealed that they were deftly picking up houseflies that settled on the ground. Apart from the unexpected food item, the dexterity of the ducks was remarkable. We watched for some time, and they were busy "flycatching" throughout. They were surprisingly accurate, not once did we see them miss.



COMMENTARY ON THE NEWSLETTER. KUMAR GHORPADE, 186 Rethel Street, St Thomas Town, Bangalore 560 084

The present issue of the Newsletter for Birdwatchers is the 50th printed number (337 nos in all brought out during the last 36 years) and is thus a landmark of sorts. From humble beginnings, as a mimeographed newsletter mailed to bird watchers known to him in December 1960 by our tireless and long-lasting editor, Zafar Futehally, we now receive a very attractive, computer typeset, offset printed edition with a coloured bird photograph on its front cover 'snapped' by S. Sridhar, who also deserves great credit for printing and publishing this now bi-monthly harbinger of 'stray feathers' on our very diverse avifauna.

This occasion demands some appropriate action and I have finally decided to inaugurate what I have had in mind for many years now. This article will hopefully begin a series of regular commentaries on the contents of NLBW which may be of some use to readers. Feedback, especially from

learned and experienced seniors (who are usually too busy at their ages), on published papers and notes, clarifying or adding to data presented, is very important. The pre-independence issue of the J.B.N.H.S. used to carry a lot of such interaction on points of Natural History by its readers, who invariably were members of the unique, century-old, Society. Such cross fertilization of ideas and opinions would not only bring in quality manuscripts for our editor and printer-publisher but also act as a badly needed check on what is Printed in the NLBW.

First, of standards, both of editing and printing. Having been in this business for the past two decades, I can comment with courage, conviction and objectivity. Complaints on editorial sagacity and judgement by three serious younger readers (Santharam, Purandare, Kazmierczak (NLBW 36 : 91-94) prompted Zafar to put in an editorial note. I continue to be terribly impressed by Zafar's single-minded dedication and timing in bringing out this newsletter, without a break, over the last three and a half decades. In early years, when NLBW was printed and mailed from Bombay (now Mumbai to natives!) he had help from local bird watchers and an impressive Editorial Board to boot. In these days of electronic marvels at our disposal, it is a pity that Zafar indicates his lack of such help. What he requires is a 'specialist' for whom this kind of editing and printing back-up would be 'no problem'. Like I have said before, and proved with some 'guest-editing', I would myself be too willing and happy to lend a concerned and efficient hand at re-typing MSS, proofing them and seeing them through the print process with Sridhar's help. And this at no cost whatever.

If Zafar and Sridhar would like it, I will contribute continuing parts of this commentary for every forthcoming issue of the NLBW where besides reviewing its contents for scientific truth (or ignorance!), I will also write on our Natural History (birds and their ecology) and highlight the badly needed protection of our undisturbed ecosystems as well as restoration of our disturbed (urban and cultivated) areas. As my friend and his very talented group in Delhi imply (NLBW 36 : 97-98) it is only by action of the common people of our land that can save what biodiversity still exists. But how do we go about doing it? That is where the wisdom of the biological scientist, the expert ones, is critical. But, as T.S. Eliot wondered, let us come to a stage where we all join him in his lament — "Where is the wisdom that we have lost in knowledge?"

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Review

SMALL AND BEAUTIFUL : SULTANPUR NATIONAL PARK. Published by KALPAVRIKSH, New Delhi. Reviewed by ASHEESH PITTIE

The book under review, is published by Kalpavriksh, with an aim to make the reader realize that even tiny protected areas like Sultanpur, harbour a bewildering and fragile diversity of life which need to be sensibly managed and treated with respect by the visiting public. It comprises of 69 pages of text (including 5 Appendices and a Fact Sheet), a Contents page, a title page, 3 maps, 19 black and white photographs and numerous delightful line drawings by Pratibha Pande. Several people are credited for having helped with this book, but the main work has been done by Ghazala Shahabuddin, Ranjit Lal and Pratibha Pande.

Though the book is heavily weighted with bird-related data, there are chapters on Sultanpur's flora, other animals found in the area (mammals, reptiles, fish, amphibians and insects), and one devoted to the future of the jheel, mainly dealing with management aspects relating to internal as well as external phenomena and problems. The Appendices comprise of lists of plants (Appendix 1), mammals (App 2), birds (App 3), reptiles and amphibians (App 4) and butterflies (App. 5). As a general reference work on the ecology of the jheel, aimed at a target audience of the lay 'un-formed' public, the information given in the book is ample and well presented. The write-ups are snappy, descriptive and lyrical (almost like a film commentary at times!), creating exquisite verbal vignettes of the ecology of this area. The line drawings (what good are such books without pictures!) enliven the text on almost every page. Three cheers for Pratibha Pande's artwork! (Indeed the Newsletter could benefit from her skills if she is approached by the Editor, to sketch birds for future issues!) The photographs however, are of poor quality. Sharper pictures with better contrast should have been used (perhaps keeping the sale price as low as possible was the constraint on the publishers). A set of three habitat shots (pps. 10,19,21), depicting the change of seasons, is a good idea. The year of publication is not mentioned. The weakest link of the book is its binding which gives way no sooner the book is opened!

It is perhaps a fitting tribute to the diversity, beauty and visibility of our avian friends, and their resulting popularity among humans, that data and text of the bird sections comprises almost half of the book! A chapter called 'Birds of the Season' describes a full bird-year in the national park, with many anthropomorphic (please note that this is what the general public likes to read!) observations of bird behavior. Some (rare) liberties (poetic license?) have also been taken with (a) bird descriptions, e.g., Lesser Whitethroats are "small off-white birds, with light gray caps" (p.12), and (b) bird behavior e.g., feeding behavior of Shovelers, "they share their time between foraging comically (bottoms up and twirling slowly!)..." (p.12), vis-a-vis the commoner method of dabbling and sifting in shallow water swinging bill from side to side on the surface. Another chapter, "Sultanpur Specialities" deals with 5 species of birds, Flamingo, Blacknecked stork, Sarus Crane, Osprey and Sirkeer Cuckoo. The authors lament the decline in the number of the flamingos over the years, confessing that "the exact reasons for this are not known" (p.24). Perhaps the answer lies in the following quote, recording the changes which have taken place after

'active management' of the jheel commenced by maintaining water levels artificially with the help of pumped water from bore wells. "The result of this activity has been to convert a seasonal saline wetland into a perennial fresh one. There has been a corresponding alteration in the avifauna, with a reduction in use by flamingos *Phoenicopterus* and an increase in pelicans *Pelecanus*. Use of the area by ducks has switched from mainly roosting, towards use for feeding. Cormorants *Phalacrocorax* and egrets use the trees for breeding (egrets used to breed in one of the other jheels, but that colony was abandoned after drainage). On the other hand, the long grass that extends right to the water precludes the use of the water for drinking by sandgrouse *Pterocles* and the large flights seen formerly no longer appear. Shorebirds of open shorelines (e.g. Temminck's Stint *Calidris temminckii*) have been replaced by those of wet meadows (e.g. Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*)." (Gaston 1994, cautioning against 'active management', resulting in the loss of indigenous ecosystems).

The list of birds observed in and around the jheel in the National Park, during a monthly census by Kalpavriksh members, over a period of 9 years, is an impressive tally of 247 species, listed in Appendix 3 (pps. 49-63), along with their status and frequency of sightings. A review of literature reveals that in the past various authors have reported lists of more than 250 species (Kothari 1988) and around 300 species (Lal 1991) from here. The value and veracity of the present list notwithstanding, inclusion of sightings over the years by other observers would have made the exercise more complete and comprehensive. It would also have served as a litmus of change in the avifauna and environmental status of the jheel's area under development pressure (which should be a useful tool for administration and management decisions). Sightings like Whitetailed Sea Eagle on 12-1-1974 (Slater 1974), Whitebellied Heron on 4-4-1976 (Futehally 1976), and Rednecked Phalarope on 6-12-1980 (Jay 1981). *Agra and Bharatpur* by Humayun Abdulali and Jamshed D. Panday (1978) (A & P), though not strictly pertinent to the area, reveals some interesting statistics. A & P compiled a list of 434 species and sub-species for the Delhi area, of which 111 were reported from Delhi only (not Agra and Bharatpur). Of these latter, 28 were doubtful and required further confirmation. Of these 111 birds, the present work records 23 from Sultanpur. Some observations on the list are : The Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* is missing. However Lesser Kestrel *F. naumanni* is reported as a migrant. A & P's checklist does not list the latter. So is the case with Spotted Sandgrouse *Pterocles senegallus*, which is listed as a migrant and was seen thrice by the authors. Does *P. exustus* really not exist in the area ? It is rather surprising that nightjars *Caprimulgus* have not been recorded and neither has been the lora *Aegithina tiphia*. A couple of prominent typos are a repetition of "Family Pelecanidae : Pelicans" on p.62, amidst the wagtails, and the caption for the first sketch on p.20, which should read "Blackwinged Stilt..."

All in all, besides being the information-packed, low-priced booklet that it is, it carries an important message for informed readers. It illustrates what can be achieved by the long-term study of an ecosystem. Diligence, persistence and cooperation among bird-watchers and wildlifers (mainly amateurs) has produced a substantial first document of the ecology of a local area, the Sultanpur National Park. A document which will be useful in every future study of the jheel and its vicinity. A document which shows how such studies could be done by birdwatchers individually or organised as 'societies' throughout the country, willing to shoulder the special responsibility of nurturing and safeguarding (against 'enlightened' development) an open universal university for future generations.

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Announcement

16th Maharashtra State Friends of Birds Meet

The Vihang Mandal, Solapur, will be organising the 16th MSFBM at the Nutan Marathi Vidyalaya, Solapur, Maharashtra between 11th and 13th January 1997. This meet offers golden opportunity for the bird lovers of India to establish contacts and exchange views. The central theme of the conference is "peoples sanctuary". In this conference lectures, seminars, discussions and exhibition on birdlife have been arranged. Registration fees Rs 300/-, Lodging & Boarding arrangements for all the delegates will be done by the organisers.

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Cover : **Curlew** (*Numenius arquata*) The largest and the longest billed wader in Europe, is a winter visitor to India. Forages along the mud flats and the seashore at low tide, probing for marine worms, tiny crabs and molluscs. Its long bill is designed to secure food that is out of reach of other waders. It has a liquid note 'cour-li, cour-li', that starts slowly and ends in a prolonged bubbling trill.

Photo : S. Theodore Baskaran